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September 29, 1972

Dr. George Kistiakowsky, Chairman  
Report Review Committee  
National Academy of Sciences  
2101 Constitution Avenue  
Washington, D. C. 20418

Dear George:

I regret that I shall have to miss the meeting of the Report Review Committee called for Monday, October 16, for I shall be en route to Japan.

However Robert Green has told me that the President will meet with the Committee to discuss not only the Committee's role, but the machinery whereby assignments are accepted by NAS/NRC, committees formed in NRC, and reports prepared.

As far as I can determine from a distance, the contributions of the RRC and its stable of reviewers have been highly creditable. The work of a few members of the group, Meselson among them, has been truly exceptional.

What the RRC's contributions -- and especially the contributions of a very few like Meselson -- teach us is this: many critical tasks are performed best when they are done by one or a very few individuals who feel strongly enough about the subject to invest a large fraction of their time in it. My own limited experience suggests that too many of the reports we review have been prepared by too large a committee, and that the committees contain too large a proportion of "easy riders," who do not have a deep desire to dig deeply into the subject. Judging by my limited sample, the selection of committee members must frequently be slipshod.

I know the President is already fully aware of the problem, which is one of the considerations leading up to the reorganization of NRC. Basically it is this - How does one recognize the Meselsons and engage their interest in important studies? How can one insure that each committee contains such key individuals?


Dr. George Kistiakowsky

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I think no amount of reorganizing of NRC can solve the problem unless some single individual other than the President has the prime responsibility for what must amount to a continuing full-time talent search. Possibly the Vice President of the Academy should be employed full-time in Washington, with the review of nominations for committee membership being one of his major responsibilities. Apparently (with some exceptions) the Division of NRC are spotty in their performance. Alternatively, one might envision the Chairmanship of the NRC becoming a full-time post, separate from the Academy Presidency.

Yours sincerely,

  
James D. Ebert

JDE:mp